

Think Tanks Dedicated to Security Affairs: The Dynamic of Networks

*Maria do Rosario Vaz

First of all, I would begin by echoing what Alyson Bailes had said about the challenges facing think tanks in the post-Cold War, and about some of the reasons why the role of think tanks is evolving, if not declining in proportion to the increase of other actor's roles and influence in the system. Ms. Bailes also went on to present a number of reasons why think tanks should join forces in networks. And so, being networks the subject I'm to address, I'd like to pick up where she left off and highlight three basic points: points that are, in fact, more observations of what is already happening than very new ideas.

The first thing I'd like to share with you is that I think that the rationale behind networks of foreign policy and security institutes in general is not dissimilar because both pool resources. Both try to build a common approach, at least a cooperative approach, in the way they work by using some form of division of labor. By this I mean each one, foreign policy or security institute, is supposed to do what they do best. Furthermore, networks of foreign policy institutes, not unlike security institutes themselves, are instruments, tools for dialogues. And we've all dwelt on dialogue as a need, as a must if we are going to address security today and in the future.

At the same time, these kind of networks can also have (and indeed do play in some cases) a role in the building of confidence, which is a big part of what I hope to show you: how these kinds of networks contribute to building confidence among actors in the system concerning security issues.

Another observation is something rather banal, but which nonetheless may be useful underlining: and that is the fact that networking has become sort of a trendy thing to engage in. It has become, in a way, a fashion. For instance, in today's state of affairs, we now see networks of universities, of libraries, of doctors, and even of European publishing houses (those that publish the same book in different languages across Europe). Why does this happen? Why is networking becoming so popular and fashionable? Why are so many people in different walks of life thinking that this is a useful and good thing to do?

One answer might be the fact that networking is the combined result of two trends (and their accompanying subtleties) which we are witnessing in the world today, and may continue to witness indeed in the world tomorrow. First of all, the transnational dimension is becoming increasingly important. Everything -politics, finance, health, economic and social issues, and environmental concerns -is becoming transnational in scope and range. The media, too. Even internal security has aspects which are more and more transnational, and this dimension cuts across not only some problems, but also across some kinds of solutions. And sometimes the solutions can only be found at this transnational level.

Secondly, I think the transnational phenomenon is perhaps considered as a result of what is, in a way, a conflicting trend - and that is integration. In the world today we are witnessing integration in a number of different fields, from security to the economy. Some people argue that integration is one of the defining factors of the international system today. Naturally, security think tanks or centers that deal with security issues would tend to network inside these areas of the world in which they find themselves placed, but now they are also beginning to network amongst themselves in a number of different sectors.

Another reason why this phenomenon is taking off is the increased role of civil society. Civil society, while becoming more and more the subject of discussion, can still only become active through organizations. Civil society can not play a role as such in the processes of integration without organizing itself first into kinds of functioning bodies. But once doing so, the increased role of these organizations in civil society prompts other institutions to organize themselves in the best way so as to shape events as best they can.

In the security and foreign policy fields we have different kinds of networks ranging from the informal and the personal to the formal and the institutional. We have, among many, the Trans-European Policy Studies Association and another one, which I'm using as a basis for these observations -EuroMesco, the network of the foreign policy institutes of the twenty-seven member countries of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

One thing that networks can do (and like EuroMesco, some of them are doing) is contribute to the creation of a common language to deal with security. How important words can be goes right to the heart of any dialogue, certainly to any that concerns security issues. Indeed, how simple and yet easy to forget is the fact that sometimes we're talking to people using exactly the same words and everybody is giving a different

meaning to that same word and or same expression. And so misunderstandings happen, even among allies. For example, I think as the European Security and Defense Identity was being discussed here earlier maybe not everybody was thinking exactly the same thing when using these four words. If we're going to build trust among states or, indeed, among peoples, it is essential that these people who are promoting such dialogues do not get trapped into their own words; and, further, that they are able to engage in dialogue and not merely produce sets of monologues.

Nevertheless, this common language will not be a remedy for misperceptions. Misperceptions are an important feature of the security landscape because they shape reality, because they impinge upon reality in such a way so as to become part of it. And so this promotion of dialogue, this promotion of a common language is a key element in doing away with this interplay of misperceptions in the field of security.

So, to highlight another argument in favor of networking is how the North makes its contribution. By bringing together different people from different countries, making them think about a certain number of issues, which often relate directly to the security field, institutions in the North present a way of making civil society take part in integration in an organized way. It can also be argued that when talking about more complex processes - especially those involving two regions (here again I'm thinking of EuroMesco and the Barcelona Process)- networks can even be used to push stalling processes forward. In spite of whatever difficulties and obstacles the governments or international institutions may be experiencing a measure of dialogue will, at least, continue going on.

Throughout this conference we've talked a lot about the need for conflict prevention. If conflict prevention is to be taken seriously, then it seems that networks for conflict prevention are also a necessity. And here I'd like to speak in favor of the horizontal approach to networks, which brings in not only different partners from different countries, but different partners from different areas of expertise. NGOs should be talking to think tanks. Think tanks and businesses should be talking to each other. And they all should be talking to governments. Think tanks should be talking to all the actors involved in carrying a number of processes forward.

Let me cite just one example: In Albania right now I think there are four hundred NGOs active, a number which gives you an idea of the magnitude of not only the role civil society is playing but maybe the need to put all these people talking to one another together so as to end this sort of functional divide which has been present since the days of the Cold War, where conflict prevention people only talked to conflict prevention people, international relations people only talked to international relations people, and European affairs people did not, as a rule, talk to security affairs people. A strong case for horizontal networking would then draw attention to the need to bring in different national actors and different people working in different fields with different expertise so as to make conflict prevention work and endure in places like Albania. Thank you very much.